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SUBJECT: Iranians in Toronto: A Complex Community

¶1. (U) Summary: The Toronto area is home to a large and well-established Iranian expatriate community that has steadfastly held on to its Iranian identity. Nevertheless, the Iranian community is far from monolithic. It is divided mainly into two factions that clash over differing views about the current Iranian government. Older exiles - who tend to be vehemently against the Iranian government - often are hostile toward those they perceive to be supporters of the current regime. That said, contacts in the community tell us that because of emotional ties to Iran, for most Iranian-Canadians, an easing of international sanctions against Iran would be viewed positively. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The province of Ontario is home to 55,905 Iranian immigrants, according to the 2006 Canadian Census, with 121,505 respondents nation-wide claiming Iranian ancestry. 46,255 Iranian respondents, live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) - over 80% of Ontario's Iranian population and 38% of all Iranian immigrants in Canada. Over 14,000 Iranian immigrants arrived in the GTA between 2001 and 2006, adding a significant growth spurt to the Iranian population in Toronto.

¶3. (U) The Toronto area's Iranian community has kept a strong cultural identity, is quite secular, and is very well established. In the city's North York suburb, where the majority has settled, one can find a large number of businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants, travel agencies, bookstores, and other services catering to the Iranian community. There are also a number of Farsi-language journals, magazines, radio, and television programs. Toronto has a handful of popular Farsi-language weekly newspapers and publications, as well as a number of popular blogs read by Iranians here and around the world. (Note: About 66% of people in Ontario who claim Iranian ancestry speak Farsi as their primary language, according to the 2006 census.) The Farsi-language media mostly covers issues related to Iran and maintaining the Iranian identity in Canada. At the same time, community members are beginning to participate in local politics. In 2007, Reza Moridi was elected to the Ontario provincial legislature as a Liberal for the northern Toronto city of Richmond Hill - the first Iranian-Canadian to be elected to public office.

Clashes Between Two Factions

¶4. (U) In the 1980s and 1990s, the first significant Iranian expatriate community began to develop in Canada as a result of outward migration following the Iranian revolution in 1979. A more recent wave of immigrants arrived in the past decade. These separate migration periods define the two major groups in the Iranian-Canadian community: those who arrived as political refugees and consider themselves exiles, and those who immigrated in recent times for economic reasons. The first-wave "exiles" tend to vehemently oppose the current Iranian government, while the newer immigrants are more ambivalent about the regime, causing discord between the two groups. In another key difference, many in the first wave of immigrants have not returned to their homeland in

decades, fearing persecution, in contrast to newer immigrants, for whom travel to Iran is more routine. However, some in the "exile" community are beginning to travel to Iran and are finding that they are able to visit family members and friends without problem.

15. (U) There are also tensions between exiles and a third group - wealthy Iranians who travel to Toronto frequently. This group is comprised of Iranian elites who invest heavily in real estate in Canada in order to diversify their wealth. They also send their children to colleges and universities in Ontario. Because this group tends to follow Iranian social rules even when visiting Toronto (e.g. wearing head coverings), members of the exile community often consider them to be closely tied to the Iranian government.

Dislike for the Supporters of the Current Regime

16. (U) Reaction to the arrest of well-known Iranian-Canadian blogger Hossein Derakhshan in Iran in November 2008 is an example of the animosity that the exile community feels towards those it perceives to be supportive of the current Iranian government. Derakhshan, who in the past few years had been supportive of Iran's nuclear program in his blog, was arrested under suspicion of spying for Israel and is still in custody. When news broke of his arrest there was little public outcry or organized effort to persuade the Canadian government to intervene for Derakhshan. In fact, some fellow Iranian-Canadian bloggers went as far as to say that Derakhshan's situation was comically ironic. In contrast, when Ramin Jahanbegloo, an Iranian-Canadian academic was arrested in 2006, the community mobilized to pressure the Canadian and Iranian governments

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to release him. Jahanbegloo was released after four months in custody.

17. (U) More recently, there was community anger in March 2009, after Iranian vice-president Rahim Mashaei visited Toronto to give a speech on Iran's nuclear program, as part of a broader trip to Canada. The event was not widely publicized and invitations were only sent out to a few members of the community. According to our contact - a director of a local Farsi-language weekly newspaper - approximately 80 people attended the event. Our contact was not invited to the event, and in fact, only found out about it the next day. As news of the vice-president's speech got out in the following days, the newspaper received phone calls from members of the community who were angry that the event took place in Toronto. Had the event been publicized, it could have drawn hundreds of people for anti-Iranian government demonstrations, our contact estimates.

18. (U) Comment: Cultural and social ties between Iran and the Iranian community in Toronto remain quite strong. Newer immigrants maintain close contact with their families in Iran. At the same time, older immigrants are finding that visiting their homeland is not as difficult as they had thought it would be. As old family bonds are rebuilt and immigration from Iran continues, the ties between Iranian-Canadians and Iran promise to get stronger. To that end, members of the community have told us that there is general support for the loosening of sanctions against Iran and an opening up of Iran - a support that seems motivated mostly by personal and family reasons.

BYSFIELD